DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 457 SP 036 219

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TITLE Democracy in the Classroom: Foxfire in Action.
PUB DATE Feb 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (Washington, DC, February 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizen Role; Democracy; *Democratic Values; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Innovation; Social Influences; Student Role; Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Foxfire

ABSTRACT

The Foxfire approach may be an example of how elementary and secondary students can be prepared by their education to live in a democracy. Core practices of the Foxfire approach include: work initiated by student interest and desire; active involvement in planning, implementing, and evaluating all learning activities; peer teaching and collaboration; teachers serving as leaders and facilitators rather than as the sole source of all information and authority; attention to aesthetic experiences; an audience for student work beyond the classroom; community involvement; ongoing rigorous evaluation of all activities; academic integrity; interdisciplinary connections; and reflection. Many teachers incorporate Foxfire gradually into their teaching practice while others plunge in all at once. One second-grade teacher worked with students to decide where writing appeared in the "real world." Her students chose to study stickers and eventually explored where stickers were sold and manufactured, wrote to sources requesting information, wrote a funded grant proposal, took pictures to illustrate a book of stories they had written, printed a book, and made presentations about their work to colleges classes. One result of training in the Foxfire approach is that teachers become more thoughtful about teaching and about life in general. The teacher begins to incorporate more of the core practices in the daily practice of living in the classroom. Through the active solving of real, day to day problems, the students become prepared for living effectively in a democracy, because their classroom has acquired at least some features of a democracy. Contains eight references. (JB)

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ED 386 457

DEMOCRACY IN THE CLASSROOM: FOXFIRE IN ACTION

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Public schools have historically been viewed as the place where children are prepared to live effectively in a democracy. It would seem reasonable to assume that such preparation would be designed to help children develop the skills that people use when they are functioning in a democracy. And what would characterize effective citizenry? Most people would agree that they would not only be responsible by abiding by the laws of the land, but they would be functioning in productive ways. They would make decisions based on sound information, and they would participate actively in the democracy by expressing views clearly to legislators, along with voting regularly. As George Wood, Editor of Democracy & Education, writes:

> This participatory sense of democracy requires more than just a social studies lesson or two on how a bill becomes a law. While certainly it is important to know how the government works (or doesn't work for that matter), it is even more important that citizens are equipped with the tools to make democracy a daily reality. Thus, we must provide opportunities for all citizens to learn how to work together, how to read critically and write for an audience, how to take a stand and how to change your mind, how to vote and how to organize. (1992, p. 2)

Without drawing any unwarranted conclusions about the current state of our citizenry and traditional education practices, the Foxfire approach is offered as an example of how students can be prepared to live responsibly and effectively in a democracy. The Foxfire approach to teaching began in a high school English class in Rabun County, Georgia, when the teacher encountered repeated failure to involve students in any kind of meaningful learning activities. As a last-ditch effort, the teacher and students launched a student magazine, named Foxfire, which was edited and expanded into the popular Foxfire book series (Wigginton, 1985). The approach is now used across the nation by teachers of students from preschool through the college years, in virtually every curricular area. In

order to articulate the use of the Foxfire approach more clearly, a list of core practices was devised. Beginning with nine, with an admission, that "there are probably more. . .", and listing 11 at the present time, the core practices define an approach which ideally includes the following:

1. Work initiated by student interest and desire;
2. Active involvement in planning, implementing, and evaluating all learning activities;
3. Peer teaching and collaboration;
4. Teachers who serve as leaders and facilitators rather than the sole source of all information and authority;
5. Attention to aesthetic experiences;
6. An audience for student work beyond the classroom;
7. Involvement in the community--as a resource for learning and as a service to the community;
8. Ongoing rigorous evaluation of all activities;
9. Academic integrity--attention to state-mandated learning objectives, but also to developmental and individual needs;
10. Interdisciplinary connections and spiraling; and finally,
11. Reflection (The Foxfire Approach, 1992).

The way in which classroom teachers are trained to use the approach, and the ways in which they choose to implement the core practices, are the first illustrations of how the approach fosters democracy. Teachers are asked to reflect upon teachers they have recalled from the past, devising a corporate list of qualities of "good" teachers. The point that is made with this activity is that in every classroom, we all teach and we all learn. Therefore, we need to give some thought to the kinds of qualities that good teaching should incorporate. Teachers are also asked to participate in what is termed the "memorable

experiences" activity, recalling the features of activities that have been recalled as powerful and lasting experiences. From the recall of these features, a list is generated which is used as a guide for planning the way in which the class will operate. The parallels between the qualities of memorable experiences and the core practices are drawn--inevitably almost all of the core practices emerge on the list that teachers make. In fact, the core practices were constructed after repeated use of the memorable experiences activity. In courses for teachers, after initial exposure to the core practices of the approach, teachers help design the agenda for the course, along with constructing the ways in which they will be evaluated. Although there are as many variations for implementing the approach as there are teachers who have been trained to use the approach, two distinctly different ways seem to emerge.

I contrast the two ways of using Foxfire by using the metaphor of how some people enter swimming pools--some folks sit on the shallow end, dangling their toes into the water, then eventually slip into the water, gradually wading to deeper sections of the pool. (Some stay in the shallow end the entire time in the pool!) Others dive in--some from the side of the pool, some from the low diving board, some from the high board; whatever the dive, the entrance is swift, with no opportunity to change one's mind!

The wade-in approach to Foxfire consists of reflecting upon one's own practice of teaching, reviewing it against the core practices, and selectively making changes in one's practice to bring it more in line with the core practices. For example, a teacher who has used whole language and cooperative learning may have had students actively involved and working with groups of their peers--they may have even had an audience for their work--but the teacher had made all of the decisions about what was going to be done. Gradually the teacher might incorporate more input from students, having them brainstorm and make choices about the direction of classroom projects. Or she might strengthen academic integrity by sharing with students the state objectives that have to be met, involving students in helping to decide how they can demonstrate meeting given objectives through their

project work. Gradually, bit by bit, the classroom teacher is able to turn over more of the responsibility for learning to the students themselves.

One teacher who chose to wade in to Foxfire began very simply with a beginning Russian class. When the students were having difficulty translating a Russian story, she asked them what they thought the problem was. They recognized that they did not know the required vocabulary. In the past, this teacher would have scurried around, making up what she considered to be a vocabulary list that would be sufficient for the translation. Instead, this time, she asked the students to identify the problem words, divided the words among groups of students, and had them look up the words in the dictionary. A corporate list of vocabulary words were compiled, and the translation progressed smoothly. A small change, yes. But consider that four years into the use of the approach, this same teacher and her students now have written grant proposals, acquiring computer hardware and software to assist them in writing stories in Russian, and are currently participating in an extended student exchange program dealing with issues of ecology in both Russia and the United States.

The plunge-in approach to Foxfire is best illustrated with an example. After her first Foxfire course, Joanne Whitley, second grade teacher at Piedmont Elementary School in Jefferson County, Tennessee, shared the state-mandated objectives for writing with her students. They brainstormed places where they saw writing in the "real world." They listed traditional things like books, magazines, comic books, newspapers, . . . and STICKERS! After much discussion, they voted on the way they would like to develop their writing skills. The children chose, yes, STICKERS!!

That evening Joanne called me, asking quite reasonably, two questions, "How much writing do you think they're going to do in making stickers?" and "How do you make a real sticker?" Stalling for time, I suggested that she might start with discussing with the children where they actually get stickers and what they do with them, perhaps with the goal

of talking to the local supplier of stickers, Walmart! The students placed a call to Walmart, asking them where they got the stickers that they sell in the store. To make a long story short, the children eventually had to write letters to companies that manufacture stickers, which quite nicely, was also a second grade writing objective! With great excitement, they mailed off the letters they had composed--and waited. No response came, and of course, Joanne went on with other projects that children devised while the sticker project was temporarily on hold.

Weeks passed--no response. Finally, Joanne called again, "Should we just give up and admit we can't do a sticker?" I suggested that she discuss the situation with the children, which they solved with writing another letter which began, "We have already written to you once, and we did not hear from you." That time, the president of the company wrote, sending samples of stickers, along with materials for the children to do the design work for stickers, plus an invitation to visit the plant where the stickers were made, which just happened to be only a few miles away! By the end of the year, in the service of doing this project, children had not only accomplished all the state-mandated objectives for writing, they had written a funded grant proposal, took pictures to illustrate a book of stories they had written, printed a book, made presentations about their work to college classes, and still did quite well on their state-mandated achievement tests! Of course, perhaps the most important learning--that of dealing with disappointment, delays, and failure--was just an added benefit!

Needless to say the plunge-in approach is sometimes a bit more dramatic, and less predictable than the wade-in approach. Although each teacher engages the plunge just a bit differently, most follow a similar kind of sequence. Teachers initially spend some time helping children to think somewhat about how they learn and how the teachers teach--depending upon the developmental level of the children, she may engage the children in the "good teachers" and "memorable experiences" activities. They then decide together on the

kinds of qualities that they hope to incorporate into their learning activities.

The teacher then shares with the students the goals, objectives, or skills that the state or locally mandated curriculum requires them to learn. (The sharing of these objectives is perhaps one of the most significant features of the approach--most children seem to think that teachers either go home at night and dream things up to make their lives miserable or else entertain them--the idea that teachers <u>are</u> <u>required</u> to teach a certain content is new information for many students!) The next step is perhaps one of the most critical for helping children to see the connection between what is learned in school and how it is used in the community. They brainstorm ways in which they see the skills being used in the "real world" (Wigginton, n.d.). For example, in the previous example, objectives related to writing bring out the expected ideas such as books, magazines, newspapers, but also more unusual, but perhaps more relevant, ideas, such as CD jackets, billboards, advertisements, road signs, stickers! Once a list of "real world projects" are brainstormed, students engage in the process of selecting the kind of project that they will do. They make a plan for how the project will be carried out, during which they keep in mind the qualities of memorable experiences that they said they wanted to incorporate into their learning experiences--they plan on ways to meet those qualities. Questions like, "How are we going to show that we have met these objectives; how are we going to make sure everyone is doing their part (active involvement); how much time is it going to take--what else can we learn through this project--but this is going to cost money--where are we going to get it? . . ." It becomes clear, fairly soon, that the real learning is taking place in the solving of actual problems in the process of completing the project, not the end product itself. As children work together, brainstorming ideas, negotiating for their own particular views, contacting community resources to determine how to carry out a project, more skills are acquired than are articulated in the state-mandated objectives!

As the project is designed, the teacher carefully guides and monitors the direction

of the project. The teacher has, as Dewey conceptualizes, "the greater maturity of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 38), and "has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity for sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him." (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). She helps students to integrate other subject matter areas, and she provides valuable "mini-lessons" when it is obvious that students lack the skills for conducting the project they have in mind--or she and the students decide on ways they can learn skills together--if the teacher doesn't have those skills either! As problems arise, rather than the teacher solving them by herself, she poses the question to students, "Here's the problem, what can we do about this?" A central feature of the Foxfire approach is that of connecting what is learned in the classroom with what happens in the world outside of school. When the teacher and the school do not have the resources needed, students have been amazingly successful in identifying community resources, both human and material, that are helpful in completing projects. John Dewey (1916) cautioned, "There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools isolated from the subject matter of life experience" (p. 8). When students interview individuals in the community, when they write grant proposals to fund projects, when they visit sites in the community, the skills they are learning in school have an obvious connection to the real world beyond the school.

Throughout the Foxfire process, the teacher helps students identify choices and the consequences for the selection of each choice, before making decisions. Once the decisions are made, the students and the teachers reflect upon the process, making observations about what needs to be remembered for the next round of decision-making. Usually, the reflection sessions conclude with, "Here's what we could do next!"

Most teachers, if they embrace the Foxfire approach to teaching, soon begin to think of the approach as simply a way to think--a mindset as one teacher calls it. When teachers talk about the transformation in their own thinking about teaching, two pieces of writing

come to mind. The first is an edited extraction from my personal journal dated June 5, 1989. The course instructor is standing before a group of teachers from Eastern Kentucky, still looking somewhat fatigued from the recent conclusion of a trying year of teaching. He has come here once again to inspire teachers to try to become more democratic and child-centered in their classrooms. The teacher begins quietly. Soon a phrase strikes me, "What I hope this course will do . . . is to make us all a little bit more thoughtful about the practice of teaching." As the course progressed, it was that single theme that kept coming back to the surface--as we examined our own practices.

Second image--words from Hannah Arendt's The Life of the Mind (1971) as she reflects on the "banality of evil" (p. 3) evident in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem:

> The deeds were monstrous, but the doer--at least the very effective one now on trial--was quite ordinary, common-place, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness (p. 4).

As I read that passage, I could not help but contrast it with the introductory words to the Berea Foxfire course and to the Foxfire approach in general--it is an approach that hundreds of teachers have now experienced--and who will tell you in glowing terms how the course has brought teaching to life--helped them to develop that wide awakeness that Maxine Greene finds so important to a lived life (Greene, 1978). And it seems to me now, after having trained over a hundred Foxfire teachers, that the one result of that course is that teachers do become more thoughtful about teaching--about life in general. The teacher, rather than consciously trying to incorporate more and more core practices or systematically choosing a set of objectives to "Foxfire" in the project approach, begins to incorporate more of the core practices in the daily practice of living in the classroom. Rather than the

teacher functioning as the source of all knowledge in the classroom, she turns problems and questions back to the students, "How can we find out about this? What should we do about this?"

At the beginning of this paper, the requirements for living effectively in a democracy were mentioned. If there is one feature that would make for an effective citizenry, surely thoughtfulness, in the full sense of the word, would be one that we should prize. In the use of the Foxfire approach, regardless of whether the teacher is a wader or a plunger, thoughtfulness does increase, both for students and for teachers. One student observed, during a "Foxfired" history unit, "I guess now I know how the colonists must have felt--we just want to have the freedom to do things in our own way!" Through the active solving of real, day to day problems, the students become prepared for living effectively in a democracy, because, in fact, their classroom has acquired at least some features of a democracy. Although it is common practice to encourage children to learn isolated facts and develop unrelated skills because "they might need them in the future in order to be good citizens," John Dewey pointed out:

> The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)

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